

## FOCUSING, LIFE COACHING AND AGEISM

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*The following article is in two parts. Part 1, The Dilemma of Aging, addresses my thoughts about the prejudice against aging, known as 'ageism'. Part 2, The Backstory, tells how a combination of Focusing and life coaching have helped to develop my ideas while at the same time facilitating a considerable spurt of personal growth.*

### PART 1

#### THE DILEMMA OF AGEISM

This year people sang *Happy Birthday* to me as usual. I saw their lips mouthing the words, but I was hearing a different refrain. In my ear, the Beatles were singing, "Will you still need me, will you still feed me, when I'm 64?" Somehow, impossible as it seemed, I had reached that milestone birthday. On my next birthday, the Medicare card will tuck into my wallet right next to the one from AARP. Middle age will be finis. No matter how you slice it, only old people are on Medicare. Sixty-five is old. Officially.

As a Focuser and a therapist, I am doubly curious. So for the past ten years I have been looking at the road ahead with more than a little interest. However, since this last birthday, I have zoomed in for a closer look. And frankly, I am aghast.

#### AGEISM

I asked myself what I thought when I heard the words *old lady*. Images popped up too fast for me to censor them:

- A shrunken blue-haired matron peering through the steering wheel of a Buick, weaving erratically through traffic at 25 mph.
- Bingo at the Senior Center.
- Dial-a-Ride.
- Fumbling at the checkout while the line fumes.
- Widowhood.
- Lots of prescription pill bottles in the bathroom.

That is just the beginning of a long list of negative stereotypes. It is hard to think of myself as prejudiced. I am socially correct. I embrace diversity. I am OK with people of all different colors, religions and sexual orientations. I am nice to old people. Could I really be harboring ageism — prejudice against old people — under a thin veneer of correctness? But if I am now officially old, isn't that prejudice against *myself*? And, if I am indeed ageist, how widespread is ageism?

In the last several months, I have spoken to groups large and small and found that it isn't just me. Ageism is more rampant than the flu. And just as nasty. In fact, it is even nastier because we would never impose the flu on ourselves, but we are drawn into a pervasive cultural climate of revulsion against old age — and we impose it upon ourselves. Here is an example. In an ad for wrinkle cream, a prominent female doctor in her mid-60s looks at her “before” face in the mirror and says, “Yuck.” To say that this is not a proper greeting is an understatement, but this doctor is not alone in rejecting her own older visage.

### **A BRILLIANT PLAN: *DENIAL***

A 44-year old friend whose work brings her into the world of rock and roll confided that she is having a terrible time getting older. She really, really doesn't want it to happen. She is not alone in her concern that aging will make her less credible or relevant. Sometimes there isn't even a specific worry, just a free-floating anxiety that a bad thing will happen if we allow aging to have its way with us.

I know a lot of smart, thoughtful people, many lifelong psychology professionals. So I began asking my Boomer cohorts, “What's your plan for getting old?” Most replied like Sandy, a Ph.D. who is nearing 70. She told me in all seriousness that getting old is not part of her plan. Her plan is to act young until she can't keep it up any longer, and then she'll follow the directions in *Final Exit*, a classic book that describes how to kill yourself. One after another told me that getting old was not something they identified with. A common response was, “I just refuse to think about it.” A friend who is 65 and a seasoned therapist said, “I am not old. When you say *old*, I think: Not Me!” It struck me as incredibly ironic that a perfectly competent therapist would suggest *denial* as a viable way to deal with a significant life stage. That goes against everything we know about healthy psychology.

### **WHAT IS *OLD* ANYWAY?**

In the dictionary, the word *old* has no value judgment associated with it. It means *advanced in years; having lived a long time; experienced*. But in the society in which we live, *old* is laden with value judgments, most of them negative. This puts us — all of us, not just Boomers — in a double bind. Because we do not want people to associate us with the negative stereotypes, we try to wiggle out of getting old. Unfortunately biology has a different scenario for us: aging is what living beings do from conception to death. We can't *not* get old.

As a therapist, I have learned that people often speak in code. In other words, there is frequently a virtual truth even when the literal words don't make much sense. Perhaps what people are implying with their denial of aging is an unmet need. We may need to grow old in a *new* way, a way that avoids the stereotypes. But if we are to chart a new path through old age, we need to get some dialog going, and this won't happen if we don't own the truth: Old age happens, and not just to other people!

## SOCIAL FORCES AT WORK

Let's look at this from some other angles.

*Demographics:* Consider this statistic. In Connecticut, my home state, one-third of the population is Boomers. This is a huge skew in the demographic. Imagine for a minute if one-third of the population were teenagers. The mall would play shamelessly to that group, courting their dollars. Store after store would stock clothing, music and accessories for teens. The piped-in sound track would sound like a 16-year-old's iPod. And we adults, inured as we are to the vagaries of the retail industry, would expect that. But one-third of Connecticut is not teenagers, it is Boomers. Boomers make up an enormous block of consumers, and we have expendable income to boot. Yet, we are all but invisible in the mall. Not one store specializes in older people. Not one store features manikins that look even remotely similar to one-third of its customers. This glaring absence points to the stigma around age. Age doesn't sell because nobody wants it.

*The Media:* Not only are older people unrepresented at the mall; we are nearly invisible in magazine and newspaper ads and on TV. I was startled one day paging through the LLBean catalog. I have been a reasonably good customer for years, but somehow not one person in that catalog looks like me!! When did *that* happen?

TV is famously influential in determining how we perceive ourselves. Yet, on TV, older people rarely have a starring role. Too often we are used as props — the overprotective mother, the problem mother-in-law, the cranky neighbor. The one place where older people consistently appear is in ads for medicine. Want to see a person over 50? Check out the ads for cholesterol, diabetes, erectile dysfunction, osteoporosis and high blood pressure drugs.

A close look at the media will also highlight the places where feminism still has work to do. Men are allowed to age on TV, but women are required to remain youthful if we are to be taken seriously. The few exceptions are soap opera stars or anchor women who have aged in place and have a loyal fan base. Even this group is made to look good (meaning "youthful") with lots of plastic surgery, botox, dye and makeup.

*The Medical Establishment:* Old age is rapidly becoming medicalized. Drug companies have a vested interest in old age being seen as a problem that needs addressing with medication. Advertising for anti-aging products is so commonplace now that it seems normal. Hormone replacement therapy for both women and men is a rapidly growing specialty. As for plastic surgery, we all know ordinary people who have "had a little work done."

*The Beauty Industry:* The beauty industry has a similar pecuniary interest in older people, working with the media to convince us that in order to remain viable, we must remain perpetually youthful. Compression undershirts for men that trim up the paunch and hold in love handles just hit the market. There is a multimillion-dollar market for hair dyes, wrinkle creams, exercise equipment, as well as the foundation garments that promise to deliver a more youthful appearance.

## THE DILEMMA

Where is the public outcry? Where is the protest about medicalization, commercialization and marginalization? The silence is spooky. Boomers have never been silent about anything. We were born, it seems, with a big mouth. We spent our entire youth protesting, picketing and sitting-in. We demanded to be heard. If we were old enough to get killed in Viet Nam, we wanted a voice in how this country was run. We raged against all sorts of stereotypes and isms. In the 60s and 70s, we marched for civil rights and launched feminism, the ecology movement, sexual freedom, and gay rights. We redefined psychology, unceremoniously yanking it out of the hands of the elite medical establishment and positioning it where the masses could use its rapidly developing methods.

The tools that my generation used to combat other isms will work on ageism, too. But in order to use them, we have to let go of our denial and own up to the truth. Age happens. It happens to all of us, even those who have been earnest about diet, exercise, vitamins and face cream. Boomers are partly responsible for the stigma our culture puts on age. We were the ones who vowed never to trust anyone over 30. We sang along with The Who hoping that we'd die before we got old. At the time, it seemed we would never get to be old, but now we are. And we need to make it OK to be old.

Ageism is even more insidious than other social inequalities. Ageism is an ism we have against ourselves. That means we internalize it. It is because of internalized ageism that we negatively judge ourselves and hold ourselves back, saying things like "I'm too old to trek the alps, go traveling by myself, learn Italian." "I've had a lovely career; I should be satisfied; why would I want all the aggravation of starting something new now?" "I can't even find my glasses, what makes me think I could . . . (fill in the blank)?" After a certain age, society encourages us to be quiet and take a comfortable chair, and we unconsciously encourage ourselves and each other to do the same.

What if it were different?

What if, instead of taking a comfortable chair, we were encouraged, even expected, to find new ways to age, to be endlessly adaptive to the setbacks of an aging body, to hold ourselves in unceasing positive regard, to keep our passions alive and find new ones, to live fully all the way to the end? In the words of D. W. Winnicott, the British psychiatrist, "Oh, that I be alive when I die!"

## PART 2

### THE BACKSTORY

The ideas in Part 1 are from a forthcoming book, but six months ago those ideas were lodged unintelligibly far back into the murk of the murky edge that we Focusers are so familiar with. I thought readers of *The Folio* might be interested in the backstory of how a combination of Focusing and life coaching encouraged these ideas forward so they can be shaped into print and a website. The backstory would not be complete without noting that

this process has been a real stimulus to personal growth, chock full of AFGOs. (AFGO is an acronym for Another Frustrating Growth Opportunity).

This whole shebang started when I asked Beverly Shoenberger to coach me. Bev is an occasional Focusing partner, a fellow Focusing trainer and therapist colleague who is also a life coach. For those unfamiliar with the term, ‘coaching’ is a collaboration between a paid coach and a client. Typically, the client sets a goal and works with the coach to come up with a plan; the coach then holds the client accountable to the plan. With a Focusing-oriented coach like Bev, Focusing is the method used to determine goals. Coaching is an action-oriented, strengths-based model. The client is assumed to be whole, creative and resourceful. Focusers will immediately see the similarity to the Focusing Attitude which implies that people, no matter how distressed, do not need fixing. Unlike a Focusing listener, the coach is highly interactive. The coach’s job is to protect and serve the client’s agenda by challenging, supporting and keeping the client on track. Sessions are typically held on the phone. The pace is efficient; there is continuity from session to session, often with agreed upon homework.

Both Focusing and coaching have been fundamental in invoking, incubating, articulating, and bringing my ideas into the world. Focusing gives me a little distance and enables me to look with interested curiosity, not judgment, at my felt sense as if raising the question, *What is going on here?* Once I’ve got a handle on it and have articulated the felt sense, coaching comes in with action-oriented questions like: What does this want to do? What happens next? Where does this want to go? Can we help it along?

## **GRAY MATTERS**

Most clients come to coaching with a specific goal in mind, but I wasn’t sure exactly what I wanted until Bev asked one of the action-oriented questions coaches are known for: *If you could do anything you wanted, and time and money were no object, what would you do?*

Without hesitation I replied that I would turn my full attention to Gray Matters, the catchall name I had for my interest in aging. The speed, clarity and sheer force of my reply made both of us sit up and take notice. Who knew Gray Matters was so very alive in the murk? For many years I have been interested in how Boomers would age differently. It was logical that my generation would be true to form and put its own unique stamp on aging. I had more than a passing interest, enough so that I gave it the Gray Matters name and started a file, but I didn’t have the time to develop it. To complicate things, when I began working with Bev, I had a serious thyroid problem that was wreaking havoc with my body. Turning my attention to Gray Matters, as fulfilling and fun as it might be, seemed nigh but impossible. But Bev, with her coaching background, was undaunted.

## THE TIME MANAGEMENT MATRIX

Coaching has pulled together lots of helpful tips from business management and sociology. One of these is Stephen Covey's Time Management Matrix. Building on Parkinson's Law — the idea that work expands to fill the available time — Covey divided work into four categories, Important and Unimportant, Urgent and Not Urgent. Work that is Urgent and Important always gets done. Work that is Unimportant and Not Urgent never gets done. But what about something like Gray Matters, which is Important but Not Urgent? That is just the kind of thing that turns into a WouldaCouldaShoulda — the kind of thing that I woulda done if only I had the time or the resources. How often have you had an idea only to see it invented or done later by someone else? Covey, and later coaching, says that in order to get something done you need to move it into the Urgent category, and that is what Bev and I did. After careful deliberation, during which I decided that I would have a big regret if I left Gray Matters fallow, I upgraded Gray Matters to both Important and Urgent.

Immediately my felt sense was alive with fear and excitement, always an AFGO alert. Focusing on my own and with my regular partner, I worked on the many ways my psyche felt stirred. What became clear was that the Gray Matters material was close to my core, deep, vital and timely. My passion was aroused and I began to look at the other areas of my life differently. Psychotherapy, which had seemed like a good way to spend my time, now seemed as if it was a second choice, siphoning off time from my main area of interest. I re-labeled my psychotherapy practice as Important but Not Urgent, except for the hours when a client was in front of me. This shift, though it was a radical re-orientation, had that familiar "life forward" feeling. I began to think of myself as "a something to do with Gray Matters" rather than a psychotherapist. But what exactly was that something? And what about the fear?

## WHAT IS BECOMING OF ME?

Bev, with her gentle expectancy of action, (how could she do this without pressuring me?) inspired me to return repeatedly and with interested curiosity to the edge of the unknown. I explored many options for my new identity and slowly, haltingly, it became clear that I am a *commentator*, a person who looks at things the way they are, sees them uniquely, and speaks up with her point of view. I start conversations and get people thinking.

I am (gulp) controversial. The prospect of being such a person struck up a symphony of fear. In my family of origin my differences were most unwelcome, and I have a cache of nasty humiliations that I can recall with little provocation. One of my very best defense mechanisms has been keeping a low profile. Still, as I Focused, I could clearly see a part of me that was yearning to speak out. It was not lost on me that my ailment was a thyroid problem, right at the site of my voice!

I was stuck with lots to say and nothing coming out. Warring inner voices shouted: Speak! No, shut up! Be seen! No, hide! During this time I imagined that I looked like I had been drawn by the bleak Norwegian impressionist Edvard Munch. However, there has been a 180-degree turnaround. I'm currently looking more like a Monet, reclining in a flower

garden in the south of France. I will try to explain as best I can what caused the shift. Like all good epiphanies, it happened in the middle of the night.

## **FINDING MY VOICE**

I had been sleepless, tossing and turning with my mind ajumble. Finally at 3 AM, I turned on the light and declared my bed my bodhi tree. I was not leaving until I figured out how to get out of this bind. I sat up with my journal in my lap, cleared a space and got curious. The first thing that arose was how tired I was. I wanted to put my head in the lap of an unconditionally loving Mother. She would protect me and make everything OK. But as I Focused, I realized that it wasn't exactly protection I wanted; it was the unconditional love. I wanted a place that remained constant and loving, a sanctuary to relax and renew, to recharge my batteries. The ghostly figure of the Mother was pointing me inward, as though the thing I was looking for was inside me.

Following the wisp of a felt sense, I located a place between my heart and solar plexus and when I found my way there, it was as though I had come home. Home is the place where all-is-well, where the love bank is refilled, where wounds are healed and bags are packed for the next foray. It is not so much a place of protection as it is an ever-reliable constant. From this place, it didn't matter if I were laughed at or disagreed with or even humiliated. I would be OK because I started and returned from this home inside of me, the place where love was abundant and unconditional.

Certainly not everyone will like what I have to say; after all, I can be controversial. Some people will hurt my feelings with their remarks, but I carry the antidote just a breath away, close to my heart. One huge deficit in my family of origin had been support. In that family it was every 'man for himself'. From my new point of view, I could see the importance of support and understood finally how to give it to myself. That dark night in my bodhi bed, I found the way to my voice. If nothing else comes of this venture, this priceless gift is enough.

Once I gave myself permission to speak, I was astonished at how much I had to say. Within twelve weeks I had a coherent body of work. Opportunities for action rapidly followed. More AFGOs. I was overcome with bouts of shyness and anxiety that I worked through with Focusing. And coaching offered the salami theory, which says there is only one way to eat a salami: slice it into thin pieces and take your time. So while I was breathing into my anxiety, Bev helped me to cut the opportunities into small slices and take my time with them. Of countless choices, I have picked two stories that illustrate how Focusing and coaching interweave, one involving a positive felt sense, the other just the opposite.

## **40 YEARS LATE FOR WOODSTOCK**

At the time Bev was asking me the powerful question about what I would do if I could, a cadre of old hippies were celebrating the 40th anniversary of the Woodstock music festival. A wealthy Boomer had bought the festival site and, sparing no expense, had turned

Max Yasgur's farm into a modern music theatre and arts complex. The *pièce de résistance* was a large museum that told the story of the 1960s and how that pivotal decade shaped a generation. On a lark, my husband Rick and I took a road trip. It proved to be as close to time travel as I ever expect to come.

The museum is artfully designed so that visitors enter at the beginning of the decade with John F. Kennedy's inaugural speech and exit in 1970 on the road out of Woodstock. It's an experiential immersion. Once you open the door to the museum you are surrounded by the music, sounds, clothing and sights of the era. The ordinary detritus of the decade are displayed all around — transistor radios and Princess phones, parts of cars, fads and fashions; Jackie Kennedy wearing Oleg Cassini, Twiggy in Carnaby Street mod.

I stood dumbstruck in the first exhibit, tears streaming down my cheeks while Rick gave me the “Wha?” look. The felt sense was so complex that it took me some days to sort it out. It goes something like this: When I check inside myself now, I feel very three-dimensional and full of life. But over 40+ years time, I had fallen into the habit of thinking of my young self as rather two-dimensional, like a black-and-white photograph stored away. I thought of young-Judy as a screwed up kid who meant well but somehow wasn't as fully fleshed out as I am now. But standing there in the museum, it was as if time folded back on itself, and I experienced the visceral felt sense of being 20, right there in my 64-year-old body. What brought the tears was the depth and complexity of that felt sense. How very alive and vibrant I had been! Not two-dimensional at all. I was open, engaged and very much a part of that time and place.

The exhibits displayed an old TV with Walter Cronkite intoning the day's body count in Vietnam, the thoop-thoop-thoop of a helicopter rotor as the soundtrack to his report. Another small screen broadcast the familiar cadence of Martin Luther King's oration. There was Bobby Kennedy on a scratchy film and the newsreel of kids getting shot by our own cops at Kent State. A young Stephen Stills sang, “Something's happening here . . . what it is ain't exactly clear. There's a man with a gun over there, telling me I've got to beware.” Once again, I was awash with the crazy painful, hole-in-my-heart sense of helplessness that bonded me so inexorably with my Boomer peers. Many of us turned to activism to try to make something good out of our shared pain. That day in the museum on Max Yasgur's old farm, I embraced my young self, and I vowed to carry forward that which was implicit in her.

Focusing was instrumental in sorting out the complexity of the felt senses surrounding that experience and coaching posed the question: What, if anything, needs to happen? Coaching made the connection between my current interest in ageism and the activism of my past. It enabled me to commit to wherever Gray Matters would lead. I knew young-Judy would be proud to see me carrying on her legacy.

## **DON'T CALL ME OLD**

A month after the trip to the Woodstock museum, I was invited to speak to a support group of nine retired professional women ranging in age from 58 to 78. Little did I know that

this innocuous invitation was to tip off a major AFGO. The ideas in Part 1 were not fully fleshed out yet, and I got off on the wrong foot with this group by inadvertently referring to us as “old.” I knew I was getting the group riled up but I wasn’t sure why. As my talk circled the drain, I felt scared and defensive but somehow was able to pull back into a Focusing stance. I managed to stop and ask them what was so provoking in what I was saying.

In no uncertain terms they let me know that they were not “old.” They made the usual arguments: age is just a number; 60 is the new 40; paying attention to age goes against the power of positive thinking: “I’m young inside” or “Even though I am getting older, I am not actually *old*,” etc. I feebly tried to say that I thought their reaction was proving my point — that we have such a dreadful prejudice against aging that we must avoid it at any cost. But I had lost my audience. No one was listening. It was time to tiptoe out the back door. In fact, I was sorely tempted to keep tiptoeing away from all things Gray in order to avoid any further experiences that aroused my primal fear of public humiliation.

However, if I did that, what would become of all the forward momentum gained in coaching sessions? I balked, but instead of scolding myself or quitting when the going got rough, Focusing helped me go to that *home* place to recharge. Once I settled down, I was able to see that the people at the meeting perceived the word *old* as an insult. And that fact catalyzed an intense month of theorizing. Shifting back and forth between Focusing and coaching, the ideas emerged from the murk, shook themselves off and dried their feathers in the sun.

## COACHING IN A FOCUSING WAY

For me, the combination of Focusing and coaching has been powerful. It feels important to have a coach who is also a Focuser. I can go into Focusing at any time during a coaching session, and it’s OK. Focusing would be very confusing to an ordinary coach; all our hesitations, silences and false starts would be misinterpreted. Coaching, with its emphasis on action, has the potential to be intrusive and aggressive, but that has never been my experience. Instead, I have had a welcoming environment to incubate ideas while honoring my process.

I started this venture without any expectations and now, just over seven months later, I am launched into a new arena, becoming comfortable hearing my own voice speak out on ageism. Even my thyroid has settled down. Not only do I see ageism as a social injustice, I have begun to look at my own aging process very differently. I see more clearly how my own internalized ageism throws clinkers into my present and future happiness, and I look forward to my new role as a commentator, even the AFGOs.

## REFERENCES

Here are a few books I've found helpful and readable. I've included the website for the Bethel Woods Center for the Arts (aka the Woodstock Museum) and contact information for my coach.

Beck, M. 2001. *Finding your own north star*. New York: Three Rivers Press. Though Martha is not a Focuser, this will give you a feel for good coaching.

Cohen, G. 2005. *The mature mind; The positive power of the aging brain*. New York: Basic Books. A well-researched expert delivers some all-too-rare good news.

Dass, R. 2000. *Still here, embracing aging, changing and dying*. New York: Riverhead Books. Irrepressible good humor and resiliency after a near fatal stroke.

[www.bethelwoodscenter.org/museum](http://www.bethelwoodscenter.org/museum). This is the website for the music and arts center at Bethel Woods, NY, otherwise known as the Woodstock museum

Beverly Shoenberger, my coach, can be reached in California at 310-457-0708, PST. She is also located at [www.focusing.org](http://www.focusing.org) under the Learn Focusing tab. Her email is: [openmeadowcoaching@gmail.com](mailto:openmeadowcoaching@gmail.com).

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